

Paisleigh

by D.C. Ceva



The night when Robert met the Scottish girl, this much can be inferred from his own account, he'd found himself in a tad of a mishap, concerning his attire. It had been a hot August night, too hot even for the season, as everyone will recall, and our dear friend, young hotspur that he was, could not bear the thought of spending its commencement inside his four walls. The quarters were vivid with thought-alikes, traversing between the inns and taverns, and the spectacles and various exhibits, in increasing states of inebriation, and young Robert yearned to lose himself as an atom of many in the hubbub. When describing the sequence of events later, he was adamant that the scents the temperatures had wallowing up and crossing over from the parks had made

him decide early on that, no matter what, he'd conclude the evening with a walk among the tamed nature, which is a choice hardly recommendable in our days, at such a time. He came after his desire once he had enough, although lively, he was not a loose, inconstant man. He drank among acquaintances, but not too much, did not gamble, and although he was met by temptation of the transactional kind he never yielded. He was breathing in the night, as they say, and spent only little time at each venue. At one such place, it might have been the last, an incident with soup and ale occurred, as caused by a clumsy waitress or a brawly other patron, the accounts vary here, spoiling both his frock and waistcoat, and with the queues before the restroom and its presumable state he had no choice but to order one more gin, not to drink it, but dip a napkin in it, and to help his precarious state as much as it was possible.

From what we understand, the accident helped sobering him a little, and he recalled his craving for the lush green and flavours so enhanced by warmth, and set upon the short route to the gardens of St. Michael's Abbey. Our citizens are one with the rare breed of the likes of Robert where spontaneity and impulse guide their moves in their spare time, but their passions are mostly frivolous, whereas the romantic and the poet will seek out pleasures of the soul to blend with the mundane, and Robert would not meet another person once he'd entered the quiet of the gardens. The park that borders on the abbey's property, though owned by the council, merges seamlessly with its expansive cemetery, and can be easily mistaken for an extension, as this graveyard is a garden in its own right, populated by bushes, hedges, shrubs, and towering above trees of more than half a dozen kinds, and much of all this foliage is growing over and conceal the oldest graves and crypts. As Robert told it, it must have been enchanting in the moonlight.

And it was there, then, after he had rested on a marble bench within a clearing, and looked up to the stars, and set his mind upon returning home, that he encountered her, appearing out of nowhere in a distance before him, down an alley lined by tall beech trees that in winter mimic gothic architecture, walking towards him like an apparition.

Here I think it best I'll let my old friend speak himself, to the best of my ability. It seems quite obvious that he was taken upon sight, her countenance and shape a spell cast onto him.

'I did not see her first, although I can't recall not having looked ahead, and the moon provided light enough, and so she gave me a small fright, so suddenly she was walking in my path. She wore nothing but a white dress of a fashion at least a period behind us, with no overcoat, and with no hat or bonnet. Her hair, as I could see from where I stood, for I had stopped in my track, was black as the night she had emerged from, and only insufficiently tucked, and in disorder, it looked like the hair of a madwoman. But there was nothing mad in her walk, which was full of grace, her feet set one before the other lightly, tranquil, and from her shoulders the air had lifted all the weight of the earth. As she drew closer her eyes grew larger, eyes embedded in a darkness she'd applied, dark eyes, almost black, accustomed to the night.

She did not fear me, although I was a stranger, she had her head cocked in the way a whippet would, and she paused her gait one and a half yards before me. "It appears we share a liking for this place, and for the night. But dear sir, I cannot help but spot the small *malheur* that has affected you."

Even though the first words I heard her speaking were mocking me, I could not feel offence, and I had forgotten how to be self-conscious. Her voice was much deeper than her slender face implied, and was it for the strange acoustics created by the wall of trees and other vegetation, but it seemed at once muted and reverberating, as if the faintest echo was repelled from merely a few feet away, for the music did not want to part from its instrument.

I did not know what to reply, so my own words stumbled forward.

"Yes, I had... It's food, and drink. Not mine."

"And so I gathered, that it's food and drink, whether yours or someone else's. You may be well advised to try concealing it, who knows who you might encounter in this part of the world, you may come upon a lady, and then what?"

As she spoke she raised her hand to my arm and started walking, and my arm quite naturally bent and allowed hers in, and together we walked from whence I'd come. The moon in our back, our shadows walked ahead, and methought I saw that hers was just a little fainter, a little more diffuse, but perhaps that was only the result of vivid imagination.

"Say, what's your name, then, stranger, since we're walking arm in arm?"

"I beg your pardon. My name is Robert, Robert Kidston. At your service. And what is yours?"

She smiled, remaining silent, and at first I thought she would not reveal her name to me.

"I'm Paisleigh, though I don't think it be proper to assure you of mine."

It was hard to notice, and I could not tell whether she had been here long, or if she made an effort to conceal it, and it was more the melody than the harder Rs, but she clearly was of Scottish breed, and I asked her about it.

"Well spotted, Robert Kidston, yes, though that has been a long time ago."

"It can hardly have been all that long ago."

"How charming. It's not a secret, but I ask you not to inquire any more about it, it's quite a bore, and I'm glad to have left it behind, and to be here instead.

Here, with you."

I searched her shadowed face for any trace of irony, but though she smiled it was the smile she'd worn throughout.

"And yet, you hardly know me."

"Can one not trust one's instincts? Mine are rather well adapted. No, there is no harm inside you, nothing to fear, not for a girl like me, nor for anyone. After all, another's meal and drink is splattered over you, yet I don't see any signs of skirmish on your knuckles."

With this she undertook inspection of my hands, and I must confess it to have been rather pleasant.

"I, on the other hand..."

We had reached a long wall before which a small legion of angel's statues stood in wake above the graves, and smaller crypts further to the back, and we turned right.

"Yes, I am quite certain," I was finishing her sentence for her, since she did not, "I am in gravest danger every waking moment in your presence."

"What makes you think you're not? Because I'm a fragile, helpless little girl, lost, and wandering about where no one hears one screaming?"

"I mean no disrespect. I'm sure you know how to handle yourself."

"Rest assured, I do."

"And you are right. I have not come to harm anyone, nor would such a thing occur to me."

"Then why have you come? What brings a handsome young man to where the night is darker than elsewhere in the city?"

"Hardly darker." I turned to watch the moon.

"But in the shadows. Look into the hedges, behind the weeping mothers of Christ. What do you see?"

"I see nothing. Nothing can be seen in the shadows."

"Oh, but I see, Robert Kidston, I can see. And would that you saw what I can see. Would you?"

And she drew close, and lay a hand upon my chest, and leaned in and craned her neck, as if for a kiss. I felt very awkward. Perhaps I was dealing with a madwoman after all.

She giggled, a soft, warm chuckle, leaning back, but held me by my hands.

"Now look at you, you *are* afraid."

"More uncertain as to what to make of all this."

"Everyone is always so unsure as to what to make of anything. The hue of resolution is sicklied o'er rather quickly, won't you say?"

"Yes. Yes, I suppose so."

But truth be told, it might have been something akin to fear I felt, though had I been asked I don't know if I could have told. Her hands, white like alabaster in the moonshine, the fingers long and slender, they were as cold as ice, and that in the warm season.

"I'd very much like to go with you somewhere, among the people, have a taste of life, your life, on a night out."

"We could visit one of the better suited taverns, or if there is no hurry, have breakfast somewhere."

"Breakfast. Why, what is the hour?"

"Nearly a quarter to five. See, the first blue is on the rise."

When I looked up from my watch her demeanour had changed. Gone was the jolliness, she had grown all serious, but in the end she forced herself to smile.

"How time flies. They say that, don't they. We shall have our meal another time. Dine another time."

"You have grown tired."

"A little. At this hour I am to be with my kind."

"The Scottish."

"The Scottish, yes." She beamed at this. "My family."

"And how shall I get a hold on you? What is your address, if that's not forward?"

"Tomorrow is a Saturday. I've read that there's an open night at the Botanical. Are you free tomorrow night? It would very much agree with me, that place."

"I am free, yes. Of course, I am."

"How wonderful! Then I shall find you there, stroke ten."

"That is very late. They won't be open for much longer after."

"Then I shall see to it that we will stay longer. Trust me." '

With this unusual arrangement in place, they parted. From what he told me at the time, and how, it was plain to me that poor Robert was besotted from the start. When one is, and how well I remember it myself, one will not heed the warnings, one will not listen to advice, and all the soul is crying out to tell one, all the small and smaller signs signifying what's awry, one will build an armour within the walls of which one yearns to receive all pains and all the torments that one knows, somehow, one is to be visited by, so I said nothing. I suspected, at first, that he was taken in by an opportunist, or that she was, as he had hinted at, indeed a little mad, or both. He had not slept, he'd come to

see me in the morning, and, though he had dark rings under his eyes, seemed happy, a combination that made him look a little mad himself, but then what else is love but madness.

I invited him to stay, to get some rest, but all I could entice him to was coffee. He had moved only recently, and now his quarters were in closer proximity to the Botanical Gardens than mine, and even though he was excited, he did not wish to grow tired in the evening, and promised me that he would sleep for a few hours. Dear boy, I said, you'll grow nocturnal if not careful.

Will it surprise anyone, of course he was on time. Should you not know, it is an annual event, the open night at the Botanical Gardens, ostensibly to acquaint the public with what they are exhibiting, which makes the Gardens liable to be the recipients of a nice package additional to their funds, but in actuality the open night is nothing but another social gathering, an excuse for exhibits of another kind, for strolling about like peacocks and hens, for purposefully getting stuck at the buffet, dousing champagne, and mindless, thoughtless, meaningless prattle abusing subjects the speakers know nothing of, only all this, once a year, among the tamed tropics, for those who haven't stuffed their quarters with enough of vegetation yet, as it has become the custom.

Our young friend was, of course, one slightly between the classes, from a good house, yes, not distinguished enough, however, to afford him the idle life of those not working for their living, and his funds not bottomless, though this no longer means as much in our days, and to be a freelancer or worker won't have one rely on family allowances, and I know of as many sons from those good houses who have been drinking and gambling themselves out of fortune, not to speak of other vices, to join the ranks of beggars, and only dangle by the thread of scornful fathers. Robert once told me that he felt quite out of place at such events, quite out of time, to which I replied that nothing could be better suited to speak on his behalf.

That he had dressed in his best attire that evening, however, had nothing to do with the crowd. If anything, he wished there'd have been fewer visitors, fewer servants, too, fewer people working for the gardens, in short, he wished there'd been no one but his flame, that there'd be quiet, space, and not a single eye upon them. This fantasy soon acquired a more practical justification, for in this turmoil, he noted that no one had an eye for the exotic plants, he could not find her. Once or twice his gaze fell on black hair above white dresses, each time he was betrayed. He had no reason to believe that she would wear the same outfitting. And as the search went on he was running out of time, as the program at the door stated they would close the evening no later than eleven. Eventually, though with a heavy heart, he resigned himself to the conclusion that she wasn't coming. A thousand reasons why she shouldn't, a million things that could have happened to prevent her, to no fault of her own. He took a glass, as it was offered to him, and settled in a corner of the large intersection of paths in the main hall, where a grand piano had been set, with a smaller crowd scattered in attendance, the musician playing Chopin, and a young composer by the name of Debussy. He looked up the flora, and to the glassy ceiling arching over them, as he was listening, growing melancholic. But cease your seeking, if you hope to find.

He had lowered his gaze, and now saw clearly on the lane behind the player that had been left all vacant her figure, just as she had been the night before, and just as then she now was once again flanked by growth, bending at the top like a cathedral. Of all, the path was the most badly lit, but enough shone from

the crossing, the player had to read the notes, after all, to make her visible to him, and just as he looked she turned her head and gazed across her shoulder, and her eyes could not have been aimed better, as they met with his without the aid of searching.

More than enough to beckon him, and our otherwise so shy young friend made across the sandy intersection, not heeding looks, and went behind the pianist, and after her.

“I am so pleased,” I said when reaching her, taking her by the hands, “so pleased that you have come. You were delayed, of course, it does not matter. But if we are to make something of this evening we better come to a decision as to what, and where, they’re closing this event.”

“Delayed? Where? But I’ve been here since when I’d said I would be.”

I heaved to say more, but she put a finger to my lips.

“Shh. We have all the time of the night. Follow me.”

I did as she was telling me, but not without a look back down the alley, where the pianist had finished, and mild applause was following him. Perhaps we were too deep into the shadow of the palms, the path not meant to attract the visitors, and no one seemed to notice us. She soon led me off the path and behind plants with leaves so broad I could have used them as a cover for my sleep, the names of which I do not know. Here she took my hand almost aggressively, but giggled like a little girl, and pulled me farther into the foliage, where now it had become quite dark. It was not far to the wall of glass of the large greenhouse that the building is, and here she squatted down as if she was a pixie of the woods, and nimbly pushed a panel of glass at the bottom of the wall until it opened upwards. With a smile she climbed out, and had me follow her, and from outside she shut the window, but not completely, and we hid within a regiment of bushes on the right, invisible to any eye inside or out. We both were jolly, as only children will be in the middle of a mischief.

We had to wait for quite a while, however. Little of the light from the interior broke through to us, and none at all from beyond the border of those bushes under which we hid, and my eyes took a long time adjusting. What I could make out was the white of her dress, and the white of her eyes, her pale skin was a vague spectre in between. Her eyes were fixed on me, and I had the curious impression that they could see with clarity, for whenever I looked I saw them fixed on mine with an intensity that almost frightened me. I believe the sensation added some romantic chill to our situation.

She had ceased to chuckle, and spoke nothing, but seemed locked in watching me. It was a spook, it was quite strange, although meanwhile, I must confess, besides the two it was attention of a kind I’d never once before received. Once I thought I heard the oddest noise, and after a short struggle had to follow it had come from her, a faint, low moan, hoarse, and not much of resemblance to her voice. I thought at that point that it was all a little much. Right then, far inside the massive greenhouse, lights I had forgotten that were there became extinguished, and she whispered in a tone that was as childlike as it had ever been, “not much longer now, and we’ll be free to walk these halls as ours.”

I had expected someone to make sure all guests had exited, to make the round and peer into the recesses, call out, lest to unwittingly imprison someone. No one came. Lastly, and she appeared quite positive about it, she declared the air as clear, and we returned to window and inside the greenhouse.

And verily, we had the whole to ourselves, no one to disturb us, no one who believed that a young pair could hide to spend the night there, there, why

there. Because it was beautiful. Magical. As it was of glass, and the glass kept clean, it wasn't all that dark, unless we kept to the shadows. Once again the moon was out, and in its light one might have read a book. The ceiling made of stars, the tall, black palms to reach for them, flora all around us, and pale paths made of moonlight, bright between nature's dark, we were first running hand in hand through a garden made of dreams, then walking it in silence.

"Have I promised you too much, Robert Kidston?"

"I wish you'd call me by my Christian name. And no, this is beyond my wildest dreams."

"Your Christian name. By which you have been christened, haven't you?"

"Why, yes. As everyone. As you have been."

"May I ask what denomination?"

"Church of England. Some say that's as far as heathendom as the Catholics allow."

"Well, then."

Said it, and sprinted forwards to the shadows.

"Wait..."

"Your wildest dreams are tamer than a lapdog, Robert Kidston...!"

As the echo dissipated so did she.

"Where are you?"

"Come and find me!"

It was easily said, and not easily done. I had not noticed that the contrast between light and darkness was this strong. She could have gone left or right, for what I knew, and either direction, if the wrong one, would have led me away from her. But she gave out one of her giggles, and so I followed to the right, at once immersed in blackness between stems and trunks, and under leaves beneath the leaves of taller growth, and even taller growth, so that none of the moonlight was allowed to touch the ground before my eyes. I used my outstretched hands as eyes, having to move at a slow pace. She began to help me by a means of making noises, cooing, growling, imitating apes and cockatoos, and now I felt as if I sensed my way through thickest Indian jungle, tigers about, snakes winding around trees, and all of it was eyeing me with hunger.

Suddenly the noises ceased, and I was left to try remembering from whence they'd come the last time I had heard them. I struggled forward for a little, but could not decide in what direction I should turn.

"Paisleigh? I need another animal to show me the way."

"Can you not see, my dear? Have you no eyes?"

Although it was dark I should have seen the blur of white, and could have sworn I'd looked in that direction. There she was, amidst what seemed a bed of leaves of quite improbable dimensions, lounging lavishly on one of them, foreign spiky cobs rising all around and slightly curving in indecent manner.

"Since light is an ingredient of sight, not quite, no."

"I can teach you," she whispered sharply, but continued in a milder tone.

"Come to me, Robert. Come."

Even though it was as dark as within the waters of a swamp, so dark that her dress was a milky river flowing from the plant, I saw her eyes, the white, with clear distinction, and every moment of my memory of this those eyes are clear and visible again. Had it been against my will, I'd still have followed them. The leave was big enough for both of us, but cracked, my weight had broken it somewhere. She made a deep sound, and both of us leaned in, no sweeter could the circumstances be. But she withdrew, repeating the strange noise of

pleasure, and once again put her finger on my lips, but this time to trace them gently.

"Be careful, Church of England. You kiss me, and the marriage lasts forever."

"A kiss is not yet marriage."

"Ah..., but this one is, not you, nor I could change it."

"If that is so, then I won't try."

I cannot tell how serious I was, we were both enthralled, but also full of jest, both of us were youthful, joyous.

She leaned back, and from what I could make out, rested her head upon her arm.

"What an easy game you are."

"And what animal are you, here in the jungle?"

"That you can't tell is what makes you easy."

"And what kind of a plant is this?" For I was not quite beyond the size of it.

"Really, does it matter now?"

"It is quite..."

"Big, yes. Elephant Ears. Gunnera something."

"And you know it by its name."

"But naturally. I am old and wise."

"Naturally not that old."

"How would you know."

This she spoke in sombre earnest, as if I had offended her. In such a situation it is wisest to wait and not to be the first to speak, but you will know, there is a little devil driving you to speak in spite of it, making it worse, and you cannot ever stop yourself. Luckily, just when I heaved to spill some nonsense, she came in before me.

"And also, it is written on a little sign, somewhere over there."

And her little giggle commenced.

"Ah."

"It's just a plant." And she lifted herself half upon me.

"But how could you ever read..."

"I told you I can teach you."

She moved her face less than an inch above my face, and I could feel the air move from my skin into her nostrils. Her face kept moving, over my brow, my cheeks, her hair tickling my skin, down to my neck, and at last I felt her lips. But perky creature that she was, instead a kiss she only nipped me briefly with her teeth, and then withdrew.

"Ouch."

"Oh, are we tender? Fragile, with a lady's soft, thin skin?"

"Not at all. Even though I do suspect it'll leave a bruise."

She gave a hollow, oddly sweet and charming scoff, and then she was all over me again, but even briefer, groaned, and squirmed, and tore herself away again.

"No, too soon. Not now, not tonight."

"Why not?"

"It's too - nice."

How sharp the sibilant, how much prolonged, the hissing of a snake. She exhaled a breath to reveal her smile in sound. Then grabbed me by the hand and pulled me up, and with a strength no man would ever have presumed in her.

"Come. We haven't fully tasted it, this place."

My ears are dry, and for some time now, when it comes to women, though I would not wish to have one think that I'm a Casanova either. I am aware of my youth, and that there's much to gain in my experience, I am in between the learned and the early student, I'm aware of that. This much I have learned, however, I would not push where others will, and if she wanted to tread slowly, so would I, and she is right. It is sweet, and there's no need to rush. And so I felt no bitterness when she gave me her hand to help me off the Elephant's Ear, and we both walked back onto the sandy moonshine, and started once more running hand in hand, until we came to a halt before the old cheese high up in the starry sky.

"They say that when you measure it when it is big near the horizon, and when you measure it again up where it's now, it'll be the same."

"That can't be true, now, can it?"

"What if it is?"

I looked about myself, and stepped aside to pluck a small, roundish leaf from another unknown plant, something that would see me, would I do the same in daylight, charged with an unpleasant fine, no doubt.

"Only one way to find out. I'll hold this leaf at my outstretched arm's length, and here, I am adjusting it by tearing off a little, until it's of the full moon's diameter. There, do you see? Or does the moonlight pain your nocturnal eyes?"

"No. Reflected light never hurts them. What is it that this proves?"

"Nothing yet. But tomorrow night, when this white ball rises again, when it looms large, I will hold this leaf against it once again, and in this manner. And so we'll know."

"But Robert Kidston, you are an outright man of science."

"Hardly. This much of interrogating Nature, I'd say, lies within everyone's abilities."

From then we walked around, mostly in silence, regarded the garden as if it was ours, stealing glances from another. We sat down at the pond, where in daylight the flamingos gather, and where she now dipped both her feet into the water. I did not feel weary, my feet and everything about me, all could have walked these paths for yet another night to follow right away. One time she told me that with her, once we were married, I'd see the world in different light. I could not tell if she was serious, and I decided that she spoke in jest, as she accompanied it with a slightly wicked smile.

And then, just as she had the night before, she became quite absent-minded, looked out at the sky, and the horizon hidden behind trees, from where the blackness was already tainted. She turned to me, and I knew it was the ending of our night.

"Can I not persuade you to have breakfast with me? It is my favourite of the meals. Especially at one place that I know."

"I prefer dinner." She said it with a sad smile. "Will we meet again tomorrow night?"

"Of course we will. Once again, I do not wish to be too forward, but just to pick me up, come to my address, I'll write it down, and I will think of somewhere we can go for your amusement. It's my turn, is it not?"

"If you'll invite me in, I'll be there. Shall we say at ten again?"

"Of course I will, I just did." '

They left the way that they'd gone before, when sneaking out through that small window in the wall of glass, leaving behind nothing but a damaged giant leaf. You'll tell, won't you, if only to yourself, if any of this struck you as

uncommon. It may be difficult at this point, as now we have a context that's provided.

But here my dear young friend's account has ended, as you know, all that can be added has to come from my voice. Three times is the charm, they say. And three times, we know now, is also the antagonist's dark rhythm, a mockery to Nature's ways.

I saw him only once again, the evening that followed. He did not come to me, he had no mind for me, or anyone, as I suspect, but I was slightly troubled from our last encounter, wanted to know how he was doing, so I called at his address. He opened with a face five years the minor to his age, so happy was he, but I could see the rings had deepened under his eyes. He flung the door wide open with exuberance, but advised me straight away that he was poor in time.

'The young lady, is it?'

'Don't make yourself too comfortable. Indeed, she'll come here later.'

'Good. I'm excited to finally meet her.'

'Oh. No. There will be opportunity another time, she made me promise that we'd be on our own.'

'Goodness, it is stuffy in here. When will you do something about that window?'

'I'll have someone coming to replace the sash before the weekend.'

'Here, let me help you. Damned thing. Why? The secrecy. What is it she has to hide?'

'Hide? Nothing. You're always so suspicious.'

'It comes with age.'

'She is merely shy. And anxious. So am I. Anxious that it won't be perfect, and it cannot be with you. I want it to be perfect.'

'How thoroughly insulting. I will spend this evening with sobbing in my drink.'

'No you won't. You know I'm right. You have a natural aversion against things perfect.'

'That much is true. But surely there's time for a sherry?'

'Of course, yes. She won't be here until ten.'

'Ten? Dear boy, that's time for a whole bottle.'

'I'm afraid I won't be ready if you stay that long.'

'Ready? Let me see. You look like a peacock, you smell like a humming bird after visiting a rosebush, and you waddle like a badger. If this was a costume ball I'd say you go as the London Zoo.'

'Aahh...'

And with a sigh of trembling lover's agony the lad sank into his sofa, after handing me my sherry, led a hand up to his brow, and doused his own in one.

'Always ten. Quite the lady of the night. Have you slept at all?'

'Who needs sleep! What a waste of time, when one can do so many other things. But she is. Lady of the night...'

'Oh boy.'

'What? You're an old puritan, you wouldn't understand.'

'Then perhaps, since you are planning to withhold her from me, you may tell me more about her, now that you have come to know her for much longer, that to be a full and whole and total of a second night.'

'You are a cynic.'

But it was here that, over sherry, he told me what transpired in the greenhouse. And told me in much detail, never mind the time, the worry, once begun he couldn't stop himself, everything about the magic night. When he

came to the scene with the moon, he jumped up with excitement, showing me the leaf, as if the moon had somehow managed to imprint itself on it, and said that he'd repeated the experiment before I'd come, and truly, there it was, equal in size, as proven now by science, and how indeed could that be true. I told him I would try to do the same, as he did pressure me.

I must confess, I understood how one could grow quite jealous as he relayed the whole experience. But there was something that I felt was somehow off, that didn't chime the way it should. Through his passionate account, and only when distilled by reason, and then it was amorphous still, but it was there. Or maybe it was instinct. We all have it, I believe, the ability to sense when something's rotten. If it gives out an odour, it is one we do not smell with our nose. I felt I smelled it. And when the hour drew towards us, when his heart began to race with feverish excitement so I could almost hear it, he ushered me out, unceremoniously, with one last sherry, and handing me my hat and coat, and wished me a good night, one last time I heard my friend speaking to me.

As you know, I did not leave, but in my curiosity I hid behind a tree in that tiny park across the road. I did not have to wait long. She was on time, almost on the stroke. I recognized her at once, as if I'd known her myself. An old-fashioned white dress, dark hair tucked up carelessly, no bonnet. Not a bag, not a parasol. Her arms free and without caution like her hair. I could see what he had found in her, she moved with almost an unearthly grace, and had I not seen the tips of her boots, I might have thought that she was moving without the trouble of her legs' labour. Otherworldly and mysterious, and, it seemed to me, quite by affect, on a purpose she directed.

I watched her as she stood before the house a while, peering up and down, then looking left to right before she walked up the steps and knocked. The last time I set eyes on him as I had known him was when he opened. I could not have been closer without revealing my presence, so I could not hear the words they spoke. I wondered what she waited for, he'd stepped aside to let her in, but still they spoke. I watched on, as he performed a generous ushering gesture, finally she entered, the door was closed, and that was it.

I had gained my first impression, and it should have been enough, but still I lingered on, hoping to catch a glimpse, even just a shadow crossing a lamp inside the living room of my young friend. I have since tackled my brain about what I'd been hoping to achieve by standing there, it is not decent, such a survey of a house, and quite against my nature, yet still I stayed, compelled by a will that seemed to be another than my own. I watched a resident come home at the adjacent house, another leaving from the same a little later. A couple walking silently together, the man to walk the steps up to a residence at the right angle, leaving her to follow, a sadder marriage without doubt. Another door opened in another house, expelling yet another person. What traffic, I thought. Widen this field across the whole of London, and what you'll have is a city of opening and closing doors, spitting humans and inhaling them.

'What are *you* doing there?!

An elderly woman, though hardly a lady, had spotted and at once startled me, and although I could not help but sympathising with her view, the fright she'd given me, and the annoyance that I felt, had me snap right back at her.

'If you don't mind, Madame, be so kind as to mind your own business.'

'Prying on the people, are we? Maybe waiting for an innocent lass? I shall call the coppers!'

'There is no need for concern, Madame. Please be on your way.'

But she was noisy, made a spectacle of it, and I wouldn't have wanted to explain myself to my young friend, had he investigated all this clamour, and she was also right, and so I made my exit, with a feeling of some shame, her shouts of 'fiend', 'disgrace', and 'dirty ol' bugger' following me to the crossroads.

From there I turned, more by the virtue of instinct, towards my own home, intending for a hansom I should hail. But even as I walked my steps became the enemies to will, my legs and feet stood in an opposition to the action they performed, and something in my back was determined to hold me, I could not bring myself to raise a hand. I am now convinced that what I felt was a foreboding, that sibling to the premonition we hear and read reports on, which is laying on the fringes of our science. I can only prompt you all that should you ever feel it, the mysterious notion that something is awry, pray, act upon it, do it rather soon, lest you'll be late to rectify a wrong before it's done.

A resolution is more than a decision, it may come before the latter, to be strong and solid whilst the other needs reflection. I found myself standing on the pavement, looking up to the rising moon, just as the two lovers had, and I was overwhelmed by an emotion of pure terror. I turned on my heel, and hurried back, back to my friend's, and already when arriving, still in haste, I could see that things had changed, there in the window.

He had told me that they were to leave together, and so they could have in my absence, but when one leaves the house one is inclined to leave with all the lights extinguished, and it wasn't at all dark, but only dimmed. An object had deranged the curtains, and was now resting against the glass, and around it I saw motion, not of a person or a shadow, but filigree and ghostly in its appearance, and a moment later understood the circling fog to be some smoke. Nothing was billowing, there was no flickering of flames, but all of it was quite enough to intervene.

I sprinted up the steps and began knocking hard, not ceasing until I would hear someone reacting, which followed soon, the window to me right was being pushed up open, and the angry, puzzled face of a man with balding scalp and mustard generously making up for it appeared, behind him the figure of a woman, craning to see what all this knocking was about.

He was about to complain, before he could, though, heard me yelling.

'Open this door! I am a friend of the house, and I fear there is some outrage going on! Open, hurry, it's your next door neighbour!'

Be it because the man was able to infer from my demeanour how serious the situation was, or that the clothes that I was wearing identified my class, but he hesitated no second longer, leaving his woman to stare at me, and nod. Still, it took so long. I did not fear a fire, I know one when I see it, the anguish that I felt was for my friend, I knew not what befell him, in my mind I saw her opening the door for her accomplices, saw him overwhelmed by three, four, five men, and slaughtered, saw her producing a gun, saw her foaming at the mouth with lyssa, all that within the time it took the neighbour to leave his rooms and come to the front door, until, finally, the door was opening, and I could only storm inside.

I at once repeated my knocking at Robert's door, though with more force, and with my flat hand.

'Open up! Open, I say! This is the police! Open at once!'

I listened. It was deadly quiet inside.

'Shall I call them, then?' the neighbour asked with timid voice. Both now stood beside me, and I could hear a door opening above.

'There is no time.'

As you will know, I waste no opportunity to teach myself about the workings of the world, and my position grants me the acquaintance of quite a few retired or advanced policemen, and the memory of one who told me of procedures during raids now did me well. It is of no good use to slam yourself into a door, that only gets you hurt, instead attack a door right where its heart is, right above the lock.

'Space,' I commanded, and I drew back, and began applying the most forceful kicks that I could muster. The door was ordinary, and it took me no more than four such kicks before the frame was splintered, and I could do the rest with my shoulder, the momentum brought me forth into the hall.

I could hear the woman take a sharp breath in behind me. Right before me, in the rectangle of light that came streaming from the living room, lay my friend, and he lay in blood, so much blood. Blood on the frame, blood on the floor, around him and behind, he himself was wearing a red collar of the juice of life, his shirt was red, his hands were, too.

I flung myself down at his side, scarcely looking about myself, only for a moment I gave attention to the living room, the only one not in darkness, in which I saw nothing, nothing but the right end of the mantelpiece, and the clock and cabinet on this end. He was still alive, but barely with me, and he struggled. I searched for the wound in all this blood, finding it, and took off my coat.

'You. Come here. Come here, put pressure on the wound! There.'

'Good Lord... His throat...'

'I've seen it. Send your wife for help.'

I had no time to care about the neighbour's sensibilities. The enemy was still about.

I don't know why, I knew her to still be in the living room, despite the darkness of the rest, and bracing myself, I went forward. The first I saw was the old bookshelf that had tumbled in the struggle, books fallen out, before it had been stopped by the window, without breaking it. There was blood everywhere along this side of the wall, adjacent to the hall, and the sight gave me a chill: my friend had lost a lot.

Next I saw the darkening on the carpet, circular, and roughly one foot and a little more in its diameter. Next to it, an oil lamp that had fallen, the cause of the small fire. From the sofa there were cushions, strewn all across the room, the nearest seared and blackened.

No trace of the damned woman.

'Come out! I know you're here! Come out, and face me!'

No sooner did I state my challenge when she showed herself, growing out from behind the sofa where she'd hid, her face and hands smeared with his blood, and eyes so large and mad, they'd have turned a lesser man to stone.

Something rumbled in her throat, and turned into a growl and then a hiss that made my own blood curl. She stepped towards her right, I followed suit, and next she hurled a heavy candleholder she had grabbed at me. Her aim was good, she'd have hit my head had I not raised my arm, repelling it with pain to my left elbow, and I moved towards the final confrontation. But she had moved herself, had jumped towards the window, the right, legs up on the sill, spread into a squatting, and with her hair wild and mostly open, and in the insufficient light, she looked no longer human. The trouble my friend had with this damned window proved providential, so did the fallen shelf that barred the other, and she struggled with it hard. I came at her, and she let go, and fell upon me from

her higher ground, and we embraced, I held her by the wrists, her fingers striving for my eyes like claws. I looked her in the bloodied face, then bent her down, and when I could I struck her down.

The sad news that you all have learned, I learned it when returning to the spot on which he lay. His neighbour raised his face towards me, and he shook his head. I knelt down beside my friend, and could only see his death confirmed. The wound was large, a whole section of his neck, and it had severed the carotid artery, the length of a finger's middle phalanx had been torn right out. But that I'd only learn later.

The rest, you'll think, you know. But there's much more to it. What you know is this: the coroner determined that the wound that cost his life had been caused by a bite, a human bite, forceful, and probably prolonged, until the teeth had took a hold of enough flesh to tear it out. About the rumour that has made the rounds that she had drank from it I cannot say much, only that it suits the press, that is itself out for sensational blood, to circulate such hearsay. I will admit that with her madness, and with the method of the murder, it may make sense, but we'll have to wait for this to be confirmed the one or other way, I beg the patience that I must apply from you. I have waited this long, to speak freely, and I had gladly busied myself with the arrangements for dear Robert's funeral that is upon us.

From what I learned about the sequence of events, I can tell you as much: upon arrival the girl, now believed with murder in her heart already, had knocked, as I'd observed it. The words that she'd exchanged before the door, the last my friend had spoken, were overheard by the neighbour's wife, that same woman who'd stood beside her husband when I'd entered, and they'd concerned no other thing than entering herself. According to the neighbour's wife, our Robert had expressed how glad he was to see her when he'd opened, and that she'd hesitated, standing on the landing. Won't you come in, asked Robert, and she did reply, to the effect of asking that he may invite her in, to which he said that he just did, but she insisted on the words, and Robert, with that exaggerated gesture that I saw him doing, formerly spelled out the invitation. Those who heard about it, which are many, as the neighbour's wife turned out to be of little shyness when meeting members of the press, saw in it another sign of the eccentricity the murderess was by now known for, and on the surface I can clearly see a number more of those, judging from our friend's narration as related, but I believe there to be more to it, as we shall see, I think it lays right where the heart is of this whole tragedy.

Though she seemed mad, and her madness deepening with the progress of the night, there was no doubt she was responsible. It had been she, who had extinguished the small fire that broke out, and with such presence of mind that had acted in between a murder, she would be the prosecutor's. As for the news that she has taken her own life in custody, to escape the law's good judgement, I felt no quarrel with it, and did not contradict it, but it's not the truth. She was remanded into custody, of course, and brought into the nearest station, and there locked into holding.

I had myself the opportunity to come and to inspect her that same night, courtesy of my connections, and my status as a friend of the deceased. They had not washed her, as she'd become, they said, quite violent, and there was some resentment among the force. She was restless when I entered, but quiet. Walked up and down within her cell, her right hand on her left arm, the blood on it brown and stiffened. She had taken off her boots and walked with her feet

bare, not minding the dirt. I spoke to her, keen on learning what possessed her, but she answered none of it, only looking out the small, barred window as she walked, to and fro, her neck and face turning with the turns.

Outside, the station's Sergeant told me that there were discussions that she better be incarcerated where there's personnel that knows to handle such a person, and I agreed. Plainly she was mad, and mad to such degree that it demanded doctors, nurses, ordinaries, and instruments to keep her stationary, at least until the trial. But the man and I, we looked each other in the eyes, and knew it would be for much longer.

I was still at the station when a constable with worrisome expression informed us about a heightening of her state, and the Sergeant, I, and two more constables went back to the holding cells, where I remained outside, but for a moment I could see her through the open door. She had indeed stepped up her walking, still kept staring at the window, and now was muttering to herself, eyes big and dark, and trembled under shivers.

'Perhaps it be better if you alert a physician after all,' I advised the constable who had remained outside with me.

'She'll be brought to the asylum tomorrow,' he said with less concern than spite. 'No need to wake them up tonight. Let that be the day shift's job.' And he spat before the door, and left.

And so I did myself, although I did not know what I could do, except returning to my wife. It had been a long night, and a terrible one. I'd given my statement, a statement I would give again, at the inquest, then again before the judge, and what lay ahead was equal to the events I'd lived through in its weight to tire me. I left it to the hands of the police.

All that remains I learned the following day. I had not slept but for a little, and I called back at the station shortly before noon, where I was told that she had died. What had transpired was that she had grown her frenzy into a hysteria, her pacing had become almost a running, and she had cried and yelled. They told me that she'd been under the proper observation, but upon pressing no one could confirm that they had witnessed how she'd dropped, and I suspect the constables had kept their distance, as they had felt that being in her presence had highly inconvenienced them. She had died at dawn, reminding me of both the times she had insisted that he'd part from her, as if there'd been a part in her that dreaded this particular hour long before it was to be the hour of her death. A coroner was called, and his report is still outstanding.

Physically, they quoted him as saying, he could find nothing as a cause for death, but that she bore the signs of massive stress, and his preliminary conclusion is that she has died from the result of her exhaustion. I predict this verdict to be upheld, for I'd seen the cause myself. It may sound strange to you, but the news did sorrow me. I told myself that it was because justice now could not be done, but in all honesty, I'd found it difficult to hate her when I saw her thus, that last time. For all she'd done, she'd been the final happiness my friend had tasted. And even in her fright and her confusion she had looked quite beautiful.

You will excuse me.

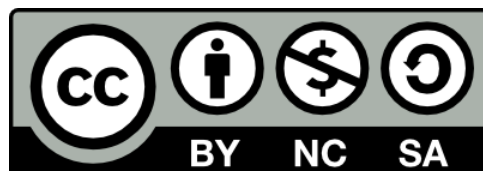
And what to make of all this? I have gone, as you'll imagine, over and over the tale that Robert told me. There is some concern, more on the behalf of law-enforcement, about her speaking of some others, of her kind, her family, but I believe it possible that this was part of an elaborate fantasy. You see, I have, since that most fateful night, and prompted by the tale, laboured over volumes of our most current literature, popular literature, much of it cheap, some

appearing in the dailies, and I have done so as much of what's occurred had served as a reminder of the themes that you may find when nourishing the mind on inexpensive, seedy readings. There you'll find it all, in the romantic, lurid fever dreams of unsuccessful authors, resorting to the vulgar, to stories of horror, meant to chill and frighten, and delight, the uneducated housewife, seamstress, market woman, tales of demons, ghosts, of unholy fiends from foreign lands. Is it a wonder, then, when among the easily impressed there'll be a more fragile soul, once in a while, who will, in absence of a teacher, priest, or simply a full life, a husband, children, become uncertain where the dream is ending, and where reality begins? Some of these creatures invented by the hacks, they are seductive in description, it's not implausible to me how they can be attractive to the lesser cultured, or how indeed, every now and then, a poor soul may yearn to be one.

It is my belief that, once we'll learn about her address, we may find a stack of just such dross, such pulp, and it will confirm what I suspect the consequence can be of its consumption. The coroner's report on her, when it's concluded, will tell us if she drank from our poor friend, and if both be the case my voice will rise. For we must see if it be necessary to establish a limit to what shall be read and seen, and by whom, for you may consider, the dailies can be read by children, too. Instead we even take this muck up to the stage, you will remember the example of the Lyceum, and the author of this scandal, incidentally not English either.

All this will come too late for my good friend. May his legacy be the foundation for a better world without this lunacy. For now I wish him a good rest, as he leaves me dwelling on the sad and strange tale of his final days and nights. For as with all the good and godly things, the evil of this world may come in threes as well.

August 1st, 2022



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